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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TEL AVIV 000441

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SUBJECT: AFRICAN ASYLUM-SEEKERS LIVING IN DEPLORABLE
CONDITIONS, BUT THEY KEEP COMING

REF: 2007 TEL AVIV 3525

¶1. (SBU) Summary. UNHCR reported February 7 that African asylum-seekers in Israel now number nearly 7,000 and continue arriving at a rate of roughly 200 per week. Without asylum laws or regulations, the GOI's capacity to respond to the growing number is severely limited. Meanwhile, African migrants/asylum-seekers are struggling to survive in Tel Aviv with the help of the NGO African Refugees Development Center (ARDC). Staffed solely with volunteers, ARDC seeks to find shelter, food, and in some cases, work for this population. RefCoord and PolOff visited four ARDC shelters February 7, witnessing first-hand the crowded and unsanitary living conditions. End Summary.

UNHCR Registrations - Almost 7,000 in Two Years

¶2. (SBU) UNHCR Representative Steven Wolfson reported February 7 that UNHCR registered approximately 5,600 new arrivals in 2007, up from 1,185 arrivals in 2006. Prior to 2006, Israel had received only a few hundred asylum-seekers ever. Of the new arrivals, 1,758 are Eritrean, 1,676 are Sudanese, 762 are from Cote d'Ivoire, 518 are Nigerian, 190 are Ghanaian and smaller numbers are from Turkey, Colombia, Kenya and other countries. UNHCR has conducted Refugee Status Determinations (RSDs) for most of the Nigerians, none of whom UNHCR determined to be refugees. Although temporary protection for most Ivoirians ended in late 2007 (a small number from three regions in Cote d'Ivoire still receive temporary protection) the Israeli MFA reported that those who received temporary protection -- approximately 1,400 individuals -- are entitled to remain in Israel up until the end of 2008 but by end of 2008 must make their own arrangements to depart. The remaining Ivoirians have received notification that they are expected to return to their country in the short term. Wolfson suspects that most Ivoirians will not receive refugee status upon completion of RSDs. The Eritrean and Sudanese populations, however, are more likely to have bonafide refugee claims. Wolfson confirmed that roughly 200 new arrivals register with UNHCR each week. Wolfson noted that he is "not worried" about conducting RSDs for the Eritrean and Sudanese, who have special protected status, so has focused his limited resources on keeping up with registrations, for which there is only a 2-day waiting period, and conducting RSDs for the other populations that do not have special status. UNHCR is conducting about 60 RSDs per week.

Israel Needs An Asylum Policy

¶3. (C) Wolfson admitted that, without a national asylum policy, the GOI bureaucracy's capacity to respond to the inflow of asylum-seekers is very limited. He also suggested there is reluctance within the GOI to publicly acknowledge that there are now nearly 7,000 asylum-seekers in Israel. Official public statements give the impression, he said, that there are only 600 Sudanese (those granted residency permits) and 600 Eritreans in the country. In a separate meeting on February 7, Tel Aviv University Refugee Rights Legal Education Clinic (the Clinic) founder Anat Ben-Dor complained of what she perceived as the GOI's inability to act. According to Ben-Dor, asylum-seekers do not have access to public health facilities nor do they receive government assistance for shelter or food. She conceded, however, that the Ministry of Education may soon allocate roughly USD 1 million for up to 50 unaccompanied minor-age asylum-seekers to attend boarding schools in Israel. Ben-Dor noted that she helped form an NGO coalition to educate Israeli policymakers on refugee detention, non-refoulement and other international laws concerning refugees. The Clinic also plans to host a conference April 6-8 focusing on the mechanisms and means of developing an asylum policy in Israel.

GOI Response - Work Permits for Eritreans -----

¶4. (C) Wolfson said that the GOI recently decided to issue work permits for all Eritrean asylum-seekers who had arrived on or before December 25, 2007. As a result, all of the Eritreans (roughly 700 people) detained at Ketziot prison (reftel) will be released. Press reports confirm that many

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but not all Eritreans have been released from Ketziot. Wolfson noted that 54 Eritreans were released from Ketziot on February 7, but another 57 new arrivals were admitted that same day. He estimates that roughly 1,200 of the 1,758 Eritreans in Israel will benefit from work permits. Wolfson also pointed out that the GOI had provided renewable residency permits for 600 Sudanese asylum seekers. The approximately 1,000 remaining Sudanese, however, are subject to indefinite detention per Israel's Anti-Infiltration Law, and most remain confined in Ketziot.

Largest Concentration of Asylum-Seekers in Tel Aviv -----

¶5. (SBU) Wolfson stated that Tel Aviv hosts the largest number of asylum-seekers with smaller concentrations in Jerusalem and Eilat. Tel Aviv's Deputy Mayor Yael Dayan is struggling, he said, to cope with the increasing number of refugees in the city. Through Dayan's efforts, the city has provided three shelters free of charge for the African refugees. The Legal Aid Clinic noted that Tel Aviv is the only municipality that has shown a willingness to host and to assist refugees.

Shelters Inadequate, Food Supplies Sporadic -----

¶6. (SBU) On February 7, RefCoord and PolOff visited four refugee shelters in Tel Aviv supported by the African Refugees Development Center (ARDC). Originally a refugee from Ethiopia, Director Yohannes Lemma founded ARDC in 2004 in an effort to create a community for African refugees in Israel. Now the ARDC, staffed only by volunteers, is in crisis-management mode, focusing almost exclusively on trying to meet refugees' basic needs of food, water and shelter. Lemma works a night job that allows him to volunteer his daytime hours for ARDC. With dozens of new arrivals per day in Tel Aviv, ARDC struggles daily to find places for them to sleep, either by leasing large basements or apartments if funding is available, or by asking friends to house individual refugees. Lemma said, "We've asked help from

everyone we know. But a one-night request turns into a month-long stay. As a result, our friends no longer take our calls." ARDC now provides support to eight shelters with approximately 630 residents, of whom roughly 200 are Ivoirians and 300 are Eritreans.

17. (SBU) Two of the four shelters RefCoord and PolOff visited were inhabited by men, one of them by mostly men with a handful of women, and one with only women and children. The three shelters with men are all located below ground level with no windows or ventilation, resulting in an overwhelming stench of unwashed bodies and stale food. The first shelter was inhabited by 190 men and a handful of women in a room roughly 50 feet long and 30 feet wide. (Lemma reported that there have been no reported cases of gender-based violence.) The door to the one bathroom was nailed shut after experiencing clogging resulting in the toilet overflowing daily. Residents now use a nearby outhouse, but have no facilities to wash. At the time of the visit, a group of five men were huddled around a plastic bag half-full of mixed beans, which they were eating with their hands. Lemma noted that ARDC distributes food as frequently as possible from private donations from individuals and restaurants, but that food is not available every day. One male resident said that he had been living there for four months, others only for two weeks.

18. (SBU) The second facility was in a bomb shelter located in a public park and was provided by the Tel Aviv municipality 20 days before. Lemma reported that, immediately upon opening the doors, 120 male Africans moved in to a space that is about half the size of the first shelter, but divided into three areas. These residents also do not have a shower, but do have two chemical outhouses provided by the city. The third and fourth shelters are in a former nightclub/prostitution house: roughly 200 men live in the basement shelter while, on the fourth floor, 78 women and 30 children live in moderately nicer accommodations with 6 bedrooms (each with 3-4 bunk beds) and 6 toilets. Lemma and Wolfson both worried about the children, 21 of whom are unaccompanied; without education or any recreational space, and Wolfson noted that many of the children are severely

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depressed. The neighborhood is also frequented by drug users and prostitutes while access to the building is open. RefCoord was cautioned about discarded needles and other drug paraphernalia that were mixed in with the discarded clothing and trash littering the stairwell up to the shelter.

19. (SBU) Lemma commented that many refugee residents have serious medical conditions, including tuberculosis and skin diseases. He said that ARDC tries to send them to the hospital or arrange for health care from the NGO, Physicians For Human Rights, but that resources are limited, and that one resident died the previous week. Prescription medications, except for the most life-threatening cases, remain unfilled.

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